A Plan for Palestinian Self-Determination

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As Iraq endures tragic paroxysms of disintegration and suffering, a solution to the question of Palestine seems more or less to be on, with an amazingly durable cast of the usual suspects trying to appear different and more effective than before. Let them try, by all means, but let them approach matters honestly. For it is also true that large numbers of Palestinians—essentially unarmed and unprotected—are more dramatically vulnerable today.

Consider that West Bank and Gaza Palestinians are presided over by a far-right, essentially fundamentalist Israeli cabinet. About 300,000 Palestinians reside in Lebanon, where in 1982 hundreds were massacred at Sabra and Shatila. Pogroms against Palestinians have begun in Kuwait, where an indefinite martial law is likely to entail mass deportations, internment camps and an even less enviable status for an unjustly scapegoated people with basically nowhere else to go.

And still the search for "acceptable" Palestinian representatives continues—a grotesque and time-wasting effort if there ever was one. Everyone knows exactly who representative Palestinians are. Nevertheless, a few days ago the Saudi and Kuwaiti foreign ministers went to Damascus to meet the Palestinian dissidents maintained as wards by Syria as a goad to Yasser Arafat. Between them these Syrian Palestinians represent no significant number of Palestinians at all; this effort by the Gulf states is meant quite simply to bleed, confuse and divide this long-suffering and dispossessed nation even further.

With a few exceptions, the Israeli peace movement has waltzed sanctimoniously off the scene, its excuse being Palestinian support for Iraq, as if the Palestinian situation under Israeli military occupation had been just wonderful before the Gulf war.

The Palestinian tragedy therefore continues, with murderous villainy and preening hypocrisy exacting a dreadful price from students who have no schools or universities, men and women who have little food, no jobs, no political rights, no certainty of life, residence or even subsistence nourishment and water a week hence.

What could be more disheartening than for the superpower that has completely destroyed Iraq as a functioning country, all the while proclaiming a U.N. mandate for its actions, now to send its secretary of state around the Middle East to "consult" with its various clients on what to do about Palestinians—even as Security Council Resolution 681, which was passed unanimously on Dec. 20, goes unheeded, unimplemented, unrecalled. According to that resolution (blocked for a month by the United States) the United Nations was supposed to actively protect Palestinians from brazen violations of the Geneva conventions by Israel. Nothing has changed, except that Israel continues the violations and has been given an additional $750 million to settle many Russian Jews on Palestinian land.

Such incoherence and immorality are breathtaking. What Palestinians have suffered at the hands of Israel, the United States and the Arab states well antedates what PLO leaders are now being preached at for having said (which was often both wrong and embarrassingly silly) during the Gulf crisis. Arab support for Palestinian self-determination was (as the history of the Gulf attests) always the result of popular pressure on the rulers, and not of their goodness of heart.

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What the Egyptian president now promotes he does mainly because he wants some Arab legitimacy to dress up his domestically unpopular American-Saudi stand against Iraq. So to look past the cant and hypocrisy that clot the scene is to realize that the main hope for any serious Palestinian resolution cannot be in a Pax Americana brokered by dithering enemies of the Palestinian people but by a renewed all-Palestinian effort to take the case directly in hand.

On the minus side, the odds against success are obviously staggering, with widespread dispersion and economic hardship much greater than ever. On the plus, a perfectly plain linkage (there all along, of course) exists between the occupations of Kuwait and Palestine. In addition, there is the tremendous resilience and unconquerable will of the people themselves. And last, there is a solid world consensus on behalf of Palestinian rights. What to do? Herewith the proposals of a non-expert but independent and committed Palestinian partisan:

- A return to the ways and means of the past is unconscionable. Therefore, Palestinians should be the first to describe things as they are, avoiding euphemism and servility, requiring accountability and seriousness of purpose from leaders and each other alike. The situation is not only bleak, it is terrible. There is hope, but only Palestinians can articulate their vision creatively, and only they can say whether it is satisfactorily being realized.
- A provisional government or government in exile has to be formed by and for the Palestinian people, under U.N. auspices. An agreement with Israel, and with Jordan, for a form of independence acceptable to the residents of the West Bank and Gaza must be directly negotiated and must be validated right away by the PLO. The basis should be U.N. Resolutions 242, 338 and 181 (partition), according to the terms of the Palestine National Council Resolutions of November 1988. These prescient and peacefully accommodating terms have never been repudiated or modified, as few commentators seem to recall.
- The situation of Palestinian exile populations has to be normalized by giving people options for compensation, citizenship or, if at all possible, repatriation. Here the terms of the Geneva conventions and Resolution 681, plus all other human rights protocols, must apply. There is no reason for further Palestinian statelessness and none for punitive and invidious laws against residence; there can be no excuse for discrimination, abuse, insecurity. As an early step, a census of Palestinians should be taken. Only an active Palestinian government and the U.N. (preferably with direct U.S. support) can take charge of such things.
- Ideally we would also have a worldwide moratorium on efforts to find "a solution to the Palestinian problem" that does literally everything except address Palestinian grievances themselves. Looking for (a) "alternative" representatives, (b) ways of endlessly trying to allay Israeli insecurity as Israeli troops sit on top of Palestinians and (c) circumlocutions to avoid discussing the most flagrant abuses of reason or morality—all these ought to be given up on grounds of rudimentary decency.

Almost 5 million Palestinians constitute a nation. Like the members of other nations they expect not be killed and punished because they do not now have a state to defend, repatriate or enfranchise them. The calculated, leisurely sadism of the current high-level tours and parleys is an affront to humanity and, I think, negates the compassion and insight that ought to prevail.

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